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Travel industry supports immigration reform

By ARNE SORENSON

Special to The Tampa Tribune

Over the summer break, Republicans in Congress heard from constituents, including businesses such as Marriott, to make sure they understand that we can't afford to dodge a decision on immigration reform.

Action now on immigration is not only in the best interest of a company such as ours, which has three dozen hotels in the Tampa Bay area, but also in the best interests of the Republican Party, the Florida economy, and the country.

The hospitality industry, so critical to Florida's economy, is integrally connected to the nation's immigration system because it dictates our ability to welcome international visitors to U.S. destinations.

According to the United Nations World Tourism Organization, more than 1 billion travelers ventured outside their home countries last year — a historic first. Many of those were tourists from Latin America and Europe who came to enjoy Florida's beautiful beaches and attractions while they shopped and spent their foreign currency.

Unfortunately, although global long-haul travel increased 52 percent over the past decade, U.S. long-haul arrivals increased just 2 percent. Florida and other globally known U.S. tourism destinations could be reaping greater economic dividends.

Much of this is attributable to dated or under-resourced tourist and business visa processing. The United States must be better prepared to take advantage of the explosive growth in travel demand that is building among middle-class consumers in emerging economies. Although the Obama administration has made remarkable improvements to the visa application process in several critical markets, legislation is needed to build on these gains.

The Senate took an important step toward capturing a greater share of the global travel market by embedding the Jobs Originated through Launching Travel (JOLT) Act in its comprehensive immigration reform bill.

This legislation would modernize and expand the Visa Waiver Program, encourage extended travel from Canada, and reduce visa interview wait times at U.S. consulates through benchmarks and a pilot videoconferencing program. The Senate also increased Customs and Border Protection staffing at high-volume international airports, which have experienced long customs lines this summer and left many visitors with undesirable impressions of the United States. The bill also takes critical steps to ensure that visitors on temporary visas are exiting the country as required.

The House would do well to take up these pro-travel measures, including H.R. 1354, the version of the JOLT Act introduced by Rep. Joseph J. Heck (R-Nev.) that now has more than 60 bipartisan co-sponsors.

These include some members of the House from the Tampa Bay area (Reps. Gus Bilirakis, Kathy Castor, Tom Rooney and Dennis Ross) who recognize the potential upside for the region.

The payoff of passage would come quickly. For example, the travel industry anticipates an additional \$2 billion in spending this year by new Taiwanese visitors as a result of their country's addition to the Visa Waiver Program last fall.

The U.S. Travel Association estimates that JOLT would facilitate the arrival of nearly 100 million visitors by 2020, an incremental increase of 33 million entries over last year that would support 1.3 million new domestic jobs. I know Marriott's 2,500 employees in greater Tampa would look forward to welcoming some of those potential guests, as well as the new jobs created for their friends and family members.

Growth in travel and tourism also presents an opportunity for advances in the U.S. workforce. The Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that since 2010, the travel industry has been a bright spot in our slow national recovery, adding almost half a million jobs and out-pacing employment growth in the rest of the private sector by 25 percent.

Immigration reform will enable businesses such as Marriott to address the challenges of staffing properties in certain seasonal resort markets. Even with the national unemployment rate at a stubbornly high 7.4 percent, many Americans are not interested in some of the entry-level positions we offer. At large hotels, including those at Florida beach resorts with small local populations, we struggle to find sufficient numbers of people willing to take labor-intensive jobs during peak season.

Streamlining the legal channels for entering this country and joining the U.S. workforce would provide a serious boost to productivity. The Senate bill lays that groundwork through its new W visa program and improvements to existing work-visa programs, with protective wage rules for immigrant and domestic workers. Our industry welcomes the prospect of a quick and accurate electronic employment verification system backed by a single uniform set of federal penalties and protections ensuring compliance. The legal immigration system must function sufficiently to help us fill jobs that Americans are unwilling or unable to take, or it will handicap our growth indefinitely.

Wherever I travel, I meet thousands of Marriott associates, from housekeepers to general managers, who immigrated to this country to pursue the American dream. Across the spectrum of the labor pool, the United States continues to be a magnet for the best, brightest and most ambitious people from around the world. We cannot lose that distinction and the competitive advantage it provides by forgetting our values or ignoring reality. Namely, we must deal fairly with the 11 million people in this country who lack legal status. They are not leaving, and we must allow them to become taxpaying participants in our society and economy.

Our country will grow faster if we have a smart immigration system that better accommodates family needs and market demands. I hope the Republican-controlled House will not let this chance for meaningful and holistic immigration reform slip away. Failure to act would maintain an unproductive status quo and deny countless U.S. companies — and their employees — a much-needed economic boost.

Arne Sorenson is chief executive officer of Bethesda, Maryland-based Marriott International. A version of this article originally appeared in The Washington Post.